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Idaho Transportation Department

Today's News Briefs

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(Oregon, Washington) Proposed I-5 link between Ore. and Wash. scrapped

The Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) -- The obituary written for the largest transportation project in recent Northwest history will note its brief but colorful life, one marked by accusations of mismanagement and overspending and by the hope that it would serve as a gateway to a growing region.

Project managers are shutting down the offices that spent more than \$170 million planning to replace the Interstate 5 bridge over the Columbia River. The Washington state Senate on Saturday declined to take up a \$10 billion transportation package, part of which would have paid for the bridge and highway project connecting southwest Washington and northwest Oregon.

It effectively ended plans for the massive \$3.4 billion construction project in its present iteration, but leaves open the possibility that another such proposal will take its place. Legislators in both states will have to begin nearly from scratch.

Born in 1999 of discussions among transportation committees in Oregon and Washington, plans for the project ran up a \$171 million bill by April 2013, according to the project's public financial documents.

Beset by a laundry list of concerns that included cost, pollution, aviation, security, geology, architecture and the political viability of raising tolls to pay off the bridge, even the name "Columbia River Crossing" became a tainted vexation, replaced in later reports from Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber with "The Interstate 5 Bridge Replacement Program."

Elements also included a possible light-rail connection between Portland and Vancouver, an option that faced local opposition in Washington state and from state Senate members from the southwest Washington region, led by Sen. Don Benton, a Republican from Vancouver.

If proponents would have been willing to take light rail off the table, Benton said, "it would have opened up a whole new path of dialogue and options."

Republicans opposed light rail as a needless expense that would unfairly burden southwest Washington residents with a bill they loudly opposed and didn't want to pay.

Those who long doubted the time and expense dedicated to the project celebrated its demise - though promised to remain vigilant in case another such proposal is put forward.

Economist Joe Cortright of the Portland firm Impresa, a longtime critic of the freeway expansion, said the project's plans were rooted in pre-Great Recession estimates of gasoline costs and driver habits.

"They were trying to build a sense of inevitability about the project because it went so long," Cortright said. The project was "based on \$1-a-gallon gas. We know that's not the world we live in."

Washington state Gov. Jay Inslee on Monday blamed the state Senate majority, a coalition comprised of 23 Republicans and two Democrats for leaving town "without any plan whatsoever on how to deal with this aging bridge."

Benton, however, said his caucus had been clear from the beginning where they stood on the bridge.

"This entire project was conceived with one goal in mind, and one goal only, and it was not to solve

congestion," he said. "The only goal was to bring light rail into Vancouver."

The original pitch was this: The bridge needed expansion to meet the traffic needs of the nation's 23rd-largest metropolitan area. The rates of trucks carrying freight and rush-hour bottlenecks were picking up along Interstate 5, which serves as the primary link between Seattle and the rest of the West Coast.

But those estimates were disputed, and more recent analysis of transportation data seems to contradict the idea of a growing number of drivers and trucks.

After its 1999 beginnings, the project became the sort of government endeavor that begets task forces, and subcommittees to those task forces. Portland alternative newspaper Willamette Week headlined one story pointing out project flaws, "A Bridge Over The River Why?"

In addition to the problems endemic to a venture of such magnitude, the project did itself no favors with planning problems and cost overruns.

In March 2012, for example, after \$140 million had been spent during seven years of planning, the U.S. Coast Guard said the proposed 95-foot clearance was too low and would block some ships or loads carried on barges.

A 2011 bridge design, which cost millions to put together, was abandoned when a panel of bridge experts called it an "impractical and costly alternative."

Project officials were unable Monday to deliver a breakdown of the way the money was spent, but most went to engineering and environmental consultants.

To its critics, it will remain a project bound in a different era.

"This is a project," Cortright said, "that was designed for a different time."